

Singh Bandhu



Sreevalsan Thiyyadi

Singh Bandhu's tranquil notes

Post Partition, Tejpal Singh & Surinder Singh tuned into
Indore gharana. A look back at their glorious journey
Sreevalsan Thiyyadi



The Singh Bandhu — Tejpal Singh (L) and Surinder Singh
— performing in Chandigarh in 1994. Tribune file photo.

The year Tejpal Singh was born in Lahore, his future guru happened to move to Bombay. That was in 1934, and India was yet undivided. By the time Ustad Amir Khan arrived as a teacher at the Sikh household in 1961, Tejpal had his brother as a co-learner. Surinder Singh was three-

and-a-half years younger and equally talented. The family had moved into a nascent Hindustan amid Partition in the wake of Independence in 1947. Refugees in Delhi, they renewed life in the commercial pocket of Karol Bagh. Sustaining their penchant for singing together, the duo rose in Hindustani classical and gained name as the Singh Bandhu.



The duo with singer Asha Bhosle.
Photo courtesy: Pt Madan Lal Vyas

Tejpal is poised to turn 90 next year. Also, the subcontinent is into its final lap of months toward completing half a century without Amir Khan (1912-74). True, the ustad's genuine innovations pioneered the Indore gharana, lending fresh elements to the khayal

idiom. Even so, Khan's ancestors hailed from the Majha region of Punjab. Amir himself was born in historical Kalanaur, a tehsil today in Gurdaspur district which borders Pakistan. From there, Lahore is barely 100 km southwest.



Tejpal Singh with Lata Mangeshkar.

Photo courtesy: Pt Madan Lal Vyas

But then human migrations entail cultural transformations. Had Khan taught the siblings while they continued to live within the confines of the Beas and Jhelum rivers, the output is unlikely to be as novel as it stands now. The two youngsters wouldn't have even sensed elements particularly attractive about the Ustad. Amir's uniqueness stemmed partly from his father

Shahmir Khan's allegiance to Bhendi Bazaar as a fast-emerging gharana with origins in South Mumbai. Some 600 km northeast of the metropolis, he was a musician in the Maratha court of the Holkars. The sarangi and veena were Shahmir's instruments of mastery; as were his other son Bashir Khan's. Down the line, only Amir took wholly to vocals, and became an icon with his individualism subtly backed by eclecticism.

The resultant charm spellbound the subsequent generations. Tejpal's was one. "If I learn any more music, it will only be from Khan saheb," he had decided at the age of 18. This was following the release of 'Baiju Bawra' in 1952. The romantic drama film had its title song rendered by Amir Khan. Tuned by Naushad to the evening Purya Dhanashri raga and set to the 12-beat Ek Taal, 'Tori Jai Jai Kartar' spanned barely four minutes. "Yet, it was the first pure classical number in Hindi cinema," Tejpal would trail off.



The Singh Bandhu with their guru, Ustad Amir Khan, at the 1971 Swami Haridas Sangeet Sammelan in Mumbai.

Photo courtesy: Pt Madan Lal Vyas

He, along with Surinder, had to wait for a decade to get Khan as the tutor. Tenacious efforts convinced the ustad about the earnestness of the potential students. He agreed eventually and stayed intermittently at their Delhi house. The siblings weren't new to the drill; they had practised sa-re-ga-ma under their eldest brother right from the Lahore days. Gursharan Singh, 12 years older than Tejpal, was their initial tutor. The two children sang often at the city's radio station. That rigour has had a mark, particularly on Tejpal, whose style has streaks of Kirana-Patiala, going by scholars. Amir Khan happily accommodated the hangover, as Surinder would recall in an interview: "Unlike most ustads, he respected other schools too. Even after the ceremonial ganda bandhan

(which formalises the student-teacher tie), Khan saheb let us imbibe anything suitable, but he was keen we should never imitate anyone, including him.”

Among all the gifts from Khan, Merukhand was the icing, notes Tejpal. Conjuring up such an exhaustive range of permutations around a minimal stock of notes lit up the ustad’s khayal passages like none, he says, even as the rudiments of the technique can be traced to Bhendi Bazaar. The Singh Bandhu, on their part, went on to brighten Gurbani recital by their immaculate rendition of the shabad kirtan. One of its finer points comes clear when Surinder explains about the Sikh holy book thus: “Guru Granth Sahib employs 31 ragas. Adana is not among them, but we use it as a prakar of the bigger Kanhara.”

Tejpal would never dismiss the young generation for an alleged lack of total dedication to music. “Those with unadulterated bhakti for the guru have risen to the top,” he points out. “See, these days we don’t have many households that reverberate with music all the time. Further, children today need to necessarily undergo formal education.” The Singh Bandhu got both: Tejpal, for instance, holds a Masters in mathematics from Hansraj College in Delhi. Earlier, in Lahore, their eldest brother, who developed blindness as a child, was facilitated with music studies as enrichment. None less than Kirana gharana’s VN Datta was his master.

The two artistes ensured a familial continuity to their engagements with the arts. Tejpal married musicologist Renu Sachdev, while Dogri litterateur Padma

Sachdev was the wife of Surinder, who shifted to Mumbai in 1969. The spirit spills on to the pupils. “Students become a part of you. We resonate in them,” notes Tejpal, who has, with disciple Perna Arora authored a book on his ustad. Today, a reclusive Tejpal is bed-ridden, Surinder is frail too. Two decades have passed since the Singh Bandhu gave a concert.

Overall, how has the journey been with Amir Khan? To Surinder, the defining feature of the ustad’s music is khamoshi — the silence integral to his timbre. It’s a far cry from the insecure and riotous days of Partition. For the ustad’s tutelage alone, the crossover was worth the struggle.





